

One and Indivisible?

Federation, Federalism, and Colonialism in the Early French and Haitian Revolutions

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ABSTRACT Histories of the French Revolution usually locate the origins of the “one and indivisible Republic” in a strictly metropolitan context. In contrast, this article argues that the French Revolution’s debates surrounding federation, federalism, and the (re)foundation of the French nation-state were interwoven with colonial and transimperial matters. Between 1776 and 1792 federalism in a French imperial context went from an element of an academic conversation among bureaucrats and economists to a matter of violent struggle in Saint-Domingue that generated new agendas in the metropole. Going beyond the binary language of union and secession, the article examines the contest over federation and federalism in Saint-Domingue between free people of color and white planters who, taking inspiration from both metropolitan and non-French experiences with federalism, sought to alter the colony’s relationship with the metropole while also maintaining the institution of slavery. Revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic, unsure which direction to take and without the benefit of hindsight, used the language of federalism to pursue rival interests despite a seemingly common vocabulary. This entangled history of conflicts, compromises, and misunderstandings blurred ideological delineations but decisively shaped the genesis of the French imperial republic.

KEYWORDS French Revolution, Haitian Revolution, federalism, French Empire, Atlantic world

On July 14, 1791, Jacques Bauvais, Pierre Pinchinat, and André Rigaud, among many other free people of color, refused to attend the Festival of the Federation, celebrated for the first time in Port-au-Prince to commemorate the storming of the Bastille.¹ On that day, after two years of factional infighting, the colony was supposed to “form the federation of the Saint-Domingue inhabitants” and “unite to the whole French federation.”² An ephemeral *arc-de-triomphe* had been set up for the occasion; speeches, fireworks, and balls

1. Commissaires, *Mémoire historique*, 16–17.

2. *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, 2:716–19; Cauna, “La Révolution à Port-au-Prince,” 17.

ensued.³ The organizers wanted to solemnize the defeat of the aristocracy, stage their immense economic power, demonstrate their military strength, and define the relationship between Saint-Domingue and the metropole in symbolic fashion. The ceremony was also intended to exhibit unanimity. Yet the attempt at building consensus failed. White inhabitants, who made up only about 6 percent of the total population, had violently fought over the meanings of liberty, equality, and property in the past two years: many refused to attend the ceremony. Others rebuffed the “civic oath,” protesting the extension of rights to *gens de couleur* by the National Assembly.⁴ In response, most free people of color left the city. Bauvais and Rigaud, who had garnered military experience in the French expeditionary corps during the American Revolutionary War, were ready to take up arms and defend their rights as active citizens. They did not consent to a white supremacist interpretation of the French Revolution, which many white colonists viewed as an opportunity to oppress people of color, both free and unfree. Port-au-Prince “patriots” hoped to establish a polity dominated by whites, allied with the metropole, but emancipated from the constraints exerted by the National Assembly’s “despotism” and the metropolitan merchants’ colonial monopoly, the *exclusif*. In reality, the failed Festival of Federation exposed the fragmentation of the colony. In August *gens de couleur* gathered in the parishes of Mirebalais and Croix-des-Bouquets, which would become the military headquarters for resistance. They solemnized their union with the metropole and their faithful embrace of French revolutionary legislation against white citizens of Port-au-Prince, whom they denounced as secessionist. At the same time, the great slave insurrection in the Northern Province set off the beginning of an entirely new revolution.

These distinct, albeit intertwined, uprisings were aimed not just at redefining the frontiers of freedom and equality and raising the question of local sovereignty; they also challenged colonial subordination to the metropole. This article goes beyond the binary language of union and secession to take seriously notions of federalism and federation by placing them in their French imperial and Atlantic contexts. Federalism has been a major theme in national narratives of the French Revolution, especially in the analysis of the clash between Girondins and Montagnards over the meaning of centralization. Historians have traditionally drawn a contrast between two phases: an earlier period in which “federation” was positively understood as a dynamic move toward union and

3. Printed representations of the mythologized Festival of Federation in Paris circulated widely not just within the metropole but throughout the Atlantic world. See Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire*; Taws, *Politics of the Provisional*, 70–95; and Mazeau, “La Révolution, les fêtes.”

4. Blanchelande, *Supplément*, 3.

revolutionary regeneration and a later period during which “federalism” was condemned as a divisive counterrevolutionary crime. They have also distinguished between federalist ideologies and the politics of federalism.⁵ A newer body of scholarship focuses on the new “republican order” and on the debates between federalists and supporters of a unitary state in the European sister republics.⁶ In the colonial context, however, concepts of federalism and federation have disappeared: historians have privileged the notion of “creole autonomism,” posing from the outset the idea of a “colonial exception” in tension with legal “assimilation.”⁷

The reasons for the neglect are numerous. First, while federalism describes a mode of political organization that unites distinct and equal polities in an overarching political system, the French Revolution usually exemplifies the birth of the unitary nation-state par excellence, the “one and indivisible” republic that seems to exclude any federal possibility. Second, notions of federation and federalism have been and remain confusing.⁸ In the early American Republic, a federation, a stronger form of nation-state, replaced a weaker confederation, defined as a league of sovereign states.⁹ Conversely, in revolutionary France, words such as *federation* or *confederation* were often used interchangeably: although they suggested an idea of union among diverse parts, they came to be contrasted with a unitary centralized state.¹⁰ Third, France, in its long colonial history, did not establish federal relationships within the empire until the postwar era.¹¹ Federalism as imagined by Léopold Sédar Senghor in

5. Federalism was a program neither for Girondins nor for Montagnards but was mainly weaponized to demonize adversaries as counterrevolutionaries. Beyond the rhetoric, Jacobins experimented with democratic and short-lived federalism in Paris and the departments without necessarily endorsing the notion. See Ozouf, “La Révolution française”; Forrest, *Society and Politics*; Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes, *Existe-t-il un fédéralisme jacobin?*; Guilhaumou, *Marseille républicaine*; De Francesco, *Il governo senza testa*; Cousin, *Les fédéralismes*; Martin, “Approches du fédéralisme”; Hanson, *Jacobin Republic under Fire*; and De Mathan, “Le fédéralisme girondin.”

6. Belissa, *Repenser l'ordre européen*; Jourdan, *La révolution batave*; Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*.

7. Debien, *Esprit colon*; Frostin, *Histoire de l'autonomisme colon*; Spieler, “Legal Structure”; Gainot, “La constitutionnalisation de la liberté générale.” The comparative study on the notion of federalism in the Age of Revolutions does not take colonies into consideration. See Auderset, *Transatlantischer Föderalismus*.

8. Etymologically, the word *federation* (league) can be traced back to the ancient Greek world. Thinkers such as the abbé de Saint-Pierre and Immanuel Kant connected federation with cosmopolitanism and peace. However, the notion can be understood more broadly to describe political entities for which the word was not used, for instance, American Indian confederations. See Marienstras, “Fédéralisme et fédérations.”

9. Onuf and Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World*.

10. For an analysis of the federalist vocabulary, see Tsunoda, “Le fédéralisme et la Révolution française.”

11. The French Union, a last-minute creation to save the colonial empire in the aftermath of the Second World War, remained deeply unequal despite the declarations of intent. See Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*.

Francophone Africa was a postcolonial effort to avoid the Balkanization of African states. Conversely, before the rise of Toussaint Louverture, the Saint-Dominguan federalists, in search of a union among white planters in the Caribbean, were looking for recipes to strengthen their domination and expand their economic opportunities.

The debates surrounding federation, federalism, and the (re)foundation of the French nation-state were interwoven with colonial matters. Colonies magnified geographic, environmental, legal, economic, and cultural differences within a polity, and in the French case, colonies emphasized the challenges posed by revolutionary centralization. From the end of the Seven Years' War to 1789, "federalism" went from being an element of an academic conversation among bureaucrats and economists to a matter of violent struggle in the colonies that generated new agendas in the metropole. Historians have demonstrated that the ideas of freedom and citizenship were redefined through the intervention of the enslaved, free people of color, and white abolitionists.¹² But imperial considerations also shaped other notions crucial to the French revolutionary narrative and to the French nation-state that seem to be less directly associated with colonies and slavery. Localizing the many discrepancies between global considerations in the colonies and global considerations in the metropole destabilizes the metropole/colony dialogue. Revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic, unsure which direction to take, were driving blind, pursuing rival interests despite a seemingly common vocabulary. This entangled relationship is a history of conflicts, compromises, and misunderstandings, as the capacious meanings of federation and federalism were constantly shifting in intertwined revolutionary and imperial dynamics.

I limit my analysis here to the relationship between the metropole and the French colony of Saint-Domingue, but that relationship largely shaped the imperial politics of the early French Revolution and reverberated in other parts of the empire. Although I focus on points of connection between the two revolutions, the overlap was only partial and does not exhaust the many ways in which the Saint-Domingue/Haitian Revolution was not about the French Revolution and vice versa.¹³ For that reason, I focus primarily on Saint-Domingue's Western and Southern Provinces, where notions of federation and federalism influenced political debate.

12. Fick, *Making of Haiti*; Benot, *La Révolution française*; Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*; Régent, "Préjugé de couleur"; Gainot, *La révolution des esclaves*.

13. I distinguish an earlier Saint-Domingue revolution entangled with the French Revolution from a later Haitian Revolution.

Provinces or Allied States?

The debate over the reluctant subordination of Saint-Domingue to France did not start during the Revolution: at various moments in the colony's past, white planters revolted against metropolitan power, prompting Versailles to revise its colonial policy.¹⁴ In the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, after the shock of the loss of Louisiana and Canada, the organization and span of the French Empire became the subject of significant theoretical debates. The disappearance of the French Empire from the North American continent was a source of concern for the monarchical state, which was faced with the substantial expansion of its British rival. However, defeat also offered the opportunity to modernize France's colonial system by refocusing on the slave colony of Saint-Domingue, the economic powerhouse of the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ French economists, the physiocrats in particular, favored trade liberalization, rejected the economic validity of slavery, and urged the government to rethink its costly naval and military strategy.¹⁶ The representatives of the colonists at Versailles and the chambers of commerce joined one of the great controversies of the Enlightenment as they fought over the colonial monopoly—the *exclusif*.¹⁷ The radicalization of the polemics coincided with the American Revolution, which reformulated the debate in openly anticolonial terms. The multiple editions of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, an international best seller, contributed to placing the colonies center stage.¹⁸ At the same time, colonial "scientists" explored ideas of "racial engineering," while the racialization of French law subjected a growing number of free people of color, among whom were many slave owners, to mounting discrimination.¹⁹

At the intersection of these considerations, one of the most heated issues concerned Saint-Domingue's territorial status. Was it a colony, that is to say, an establishment destined to serve the metropole through its production and commerce? Or was it a province, analogous to its metropolitan equivalents and forming an integral part of the kingdom? Was it a form of national property, alienable at royal command, a vast factory, or a French region like any other? The kingdom's chambers of commerce argued that the colonies were indebted

14. Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches*.

15. Burnard and Garrigus, *Plantation Machine*.

16. Røge, *Economistes*, 83–92.

17. Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial*; Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce*.

18. Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, 72–121; Terjanian, *Commerce and Its Discontents*; Courtney and Mander, *Raynal's "Histoire des Deux Indes."*

19. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 141–225; Rogers, "Raciser la société"; Nelson, "Making Men."

to the metropole for financing settlements. Pierre-Ulric Dubuisson, one of the most active men of letters who specialized in colonial matters, strongly opposed this conception:

It is incorrect to say that the Colonies were formed for the metropole. This phrase brings with it an idea of obligation which I do not see established by the facts. The Colonies were formed by an assembly of men who were under no obligation [to the metropole] at the moment of their emigration. . . . The French Colonies of America are agricultural settlements whose productivity is remarkable and whose colonists are worthy of esteem; they are Provinces of the Kingdom of France, like Normandy, Brittany, and Guyenne; and if the question of pre-eminence among the integral parts of the Empire were to arise, I would not hesitate for a moment to assign it to the Colonies.²⁰

The colonies were not ordinary provinces; they were the most important of the kingdom. In a relationship of inverse dependence, the metropole was indebted to Saint-Domingue.

A few years earlier Michel-René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, another colonial specialist and the rival of Dubuisson, had popularized an idea to which the white planters would refer relentlessly during the French and Saint-Domingue Revolutions: the colony's piratical origins.²¹ Initially a gathering of Europeans in search of fortune, white Dominguan society, he claimed, was a creole formation. Hilliard d'Auberteuil emphasized the cosmopolitanism of the mythical filibuster who "saw in the universe only his particular interest" without pledging allegiance to anyone.²² These "brigands" had made an alliance with the French monarchy only to protect themselves from the Spaniards. The treaty that the filibusters and the king signed therefore guaranteed the rights of Saint-Domingue and recognized it as a legal space in its own right. In dialogue with Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, Hilliard d'Auberteuil insisted on the difference of climates, manners, and enterprises, contrasting "inner France" with Saint-Domingue.²³ The colonial relationship brought together two distinct societies in a connection that he defined as a "union." Both parties were bound by an "engagement"—a "contractual situation."²⁴ The subordination of colonists to the state's interests and merchants' greed was therefore unacceptable.²⁵ Colonial particularism, Hilliard d'Auberteuil asserted, was not mere provincialism. Since

20. Dubuisson, *Lettres critiques et politiques*, 16, 20.

21. Ogle, "Eternal Power."

22. Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations*, 1:27.

23. Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations*, 1:5. On Montesquieu in the colonists' political rhetoric, see Ghachem, "Montesquieu in the Caribbean"; and Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce*, 117–40.

24. Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations*, 1:26.

25. Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations*, 1:10–11.

the government and metropolitan merchants no longer fulfilled the terms of the contract, Saint-Domingue had the right to renegotiate its relations with the metropole.

The monarchical government itself, divided on the subject, imagined a radical reform. In 1776 the *comptroller général* of finance, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, fearing revolutionary contagion from the United States, advocated a voluntary split between colonies and the metropole that was to be advantageous to both parties. Building on physiocrats' notion of "overseas provinces," he envisaged the creation of federal relations that would transform the colonies into "allied provinces" and establish a French-style commonwealth. He urged the king to leave the colonies "complete freedom of commerce, by charging them with all the expenses of their defense and their administration." Although he did not employ the word *federalism*, he suggested that the French monarch should "look at [the colonies] no longer as enslaved provinces, but as friendly states, protected, if you will, but foreign and separate."²⁶ This project was not entirely new: a wealthy planter from Martinique, Jean-Baptiste Dubuc, had popularized the metaphor of enslavement to challenge the subordination of colonies to the metropole, and Jean-Baptiste, comte d'Estaing, had imagined the creation of a new French-Spanish status for Louisiana in 1769.²⁷ Turgot went farther, though: he pushed for the creation of an association based on a federative link and not on a colonial type of dependency relationship.²⁸ Louis XVI, however, took the advice of his other ministers, who remained committed to a narrower definition of colonies. Although the king dismissed Turgot shortly after rejecting his proposal, the report of the French liberal thinker captured the colonists' imagination for a long time.

These ideas shaped white planters' claims at the beginning of the French Revolution. The colonial lobbyists hesitated between two partly contradictory reform programs. In requesting representation in the Estates General, they asserted that Saint-Domingue was like a "province" and that they should therefore take part in national sovereignty and contribute to the "regeneration of the empire." Intent on protecting slavery and the "prejudice of color [*préjugé de couleur*]" from metropolitan reforms, however, they also demanded a special colonial status and a separate political process.²⁹ Many were frustrated that free people of color, through their prominent spokesman Julien Raimond, were getting the attention of the king's ministers. The economic primacy of the colony,

26. Turgot, *Mémoire sur les colonies américaines*, 22. On the physiocratic notion of "overseas provinces," see Røge, *Economistes*, 105–33.

27. Vidal, "De province à colonie."

28. Turgot, *Mémoire sur les colonies américaines*, 31.

29. Ghachem, "'Trap' of Representation."

based on the exploitation of almost 550,000 enslaved people, supported the whites' demands. The planters' lobbyists tirelessly repeated, without much evidence, that Saint-Domingue's bustling economy employed 6 million people in the metropole. Moreover, they argued, if Corsica, which had been recently acquired by the monarchy and whose sovereignty was still shared formally between Genoa and France, was to be represented in the Estates General, then it was unacceptable for Saint-Domingue to have no deputies.³⁰ This deliberate ambiguity about the status of Saint-Domingue continued through the early years of the French Revolution. Colonial deputies in the metropole and assemblies in Saint-Domingue deployed either the affirmation of national unity or demands for federalism, depending on which strategy better helped them reconcile the racialized regime of slavery with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Legislative Unity against Federalism

The delay in seating the white Saint-Dominguan deputies in the Constituent Assembly immediately posed thorny questions: could the colonies be depositories of a portion of the national sovereignty, and would they write their own constitution?³¹ As long as the white colonists were represented at Versailles, the National Assembly could claim legislative monopoly over the constitution of the empire as a whole. Yet, after the missed opportunity of the night of August 4, during which a few noble representatives envisaged abolishing slavery, a tacit consensus among deputies posited that the Declaration of the Rights of Man would not apply in the colonies. A colonial lobby created in August 1789, the Club Massiac, opposed the abolitionist Société des Amis des Noirs and scrambled to silence the debate about the political status of colonies to avoid any debate on slavery.³² But this strategy proved unfeasible because of the opposition between merchants and planters on the colonial monopoly.³³ Free people of color, organized within the Société des Citoyens de Couleur, made their voices heard, drawing abbé Grégoire into the fight. Dismissing colonies from public debates was impossible. Therefore the Club Massiac reluctantly supported the principle of a double constitution: one for the metropole, the other for Saint-Domingue.

30. Kolla, *Sovereignty*, 35–74.

31. The colonists were not admitted to the Estates General, but their illegally elected deputies managed to take the Tennis Court Oath before facing the resistance of Mirabeau and the Société des Amis des Noirs. For more detail, see Popkin, "Saint-Domingue."

32. On Massiac, see Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue*. There were rival colonial lobbies that disagreed on nearly everything. See Covo, "Le Comité des colonies."

33. Covo, "L'Assemblée constituante."

This project ran up against the constituents' absolute rejection of a federalist regime. *Federalism*, a word rarely used at the beginning of the French Revolution and whose definition remained polysemic and vague, referred to republican regimes, which most commentators considered impractical for a large country like France.³⁴ Unlike the Swiss Confederation, the sovereignty, the territory, and the people of monarchical France were deemed indivisible.³⁵ There was to be only one supreme law to which the nation of citizens had consented by way of a representative democracy. The rejection of federalism was motivated by the egalitarian principle that granted identical rights to all parts of the kingdom, since the privileged provinces and the inequalities that resulted from special laws had theoretically ceased to exist on the night of August 4, 1789. During the debate that led to the creation of the departments, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès rejected "the false principles" that were "nothing less than cutting, fragmenting, tearing France into an infinity of small democracies which would then unite only by the bonds of a general confederation, roughly like the 13 or 14 United States of America. . . . France must not be an assembly of small nations that would govern themselves separately in democracies; it is not a collection; it is a unique whole."³⁶

French indivisibility was not exclusively ideological; it also had defensive and military aspects. The monarchy was the linchpin of the nation's unity, and it stood in direct opposition to a "federative republic" that was doomed to fragmentation and chaos because of competing local interests. Deputy Jean-Joseph Mounier spoke for most of his colleagues when he analyzed the vices and virtues of "federative government," which he defined as "a defensive league between several sovereignties like the Swiss Cantons, the United Provinces and the United States of America."³⁷ Pinpointing the example of the Netherlands, he warned against growing local divisions that would unbalance the relationships between provinces and give rise to a centralist tyrannical force—a French stadtholder. Small federative and democratic republics would be more likely to fragment; their constituent elements would secede, paving the way for counterrevolution. Alternately, like the United Provinces, whose revolution had recently been crushed by the British and the Prussians, they would be vulnerable to their larger neighbors.³⁸ The relationship between the metropole and the colonies could not be disentangled from broader considerations of the new international order: if France wanted to avoid the fate of the Dutch revolution, it had to be unitary, egalitarian, and monarchical.

34. Bart, "La République dans les limbes."

35. Debbasch, *Le principe révolutionnaire*.

36. *Archives parlementaires* (hereafter AP), 8:593.

37. Mounier, *Considérations sur les gouvernements*, 24.

38. Jourdan, "Netherlands in the Constellation."

Nevertheless, since the creation of eighty-three departments did not include the colonies, the Saint-Domingue question remained unsettled. Could the regenerated kingdom accommodate a colonial exception maintaining the slave plantation system? Could this exception take the form of an egalitarian federal tie linking France to the colonies? The planters, the great traders, and the deputies—all fighting over the commercial relationship with Saint-Domingue—addressed the topic obliquely. Jean-François, comte de Reynaud, explicitly referred to Turgot’s memoir and called for the establishment of a “federative” relationship: “The Colony is part of the confederation that unites all the provinces of the French empire.” He claimed that Saint-Domingue was an ally, not a subject, in an encompassing political entity that he described as a “confederation.”³⁹ Establishing a federal relationship could reconcile colonial slavery and racial discrimination with the regeneration of the metropole while strengthening the political rights and commercial independence of Saint-Domingue. Sieyès himself, anxious to preserve the commercial power of France, was ready to acknowledge the irreducible particularism of the colonies, but he lamented the presence of their representatives in the National Assembly. He wondered whether “for the interest of the Colonies and France itself, it would not be better for them to “be represented on the island and to have only a *federal* deputation to metropolitan France.”⁴⁰

The debate intersected with another major issue at the beginning of the French Revolution: the controversial relevance of the United States for France.⁴¹ Translations of state constitutions from across the Atlantic had circulated broadly and sparked major debates in the 1780s.⁴² Interestingly though, in the debate over the constitutional status of the colonies, references to the “land of liberty” served a counterrevolutionary logic. Diffusionist histories of the “Atlantic Revolution” miss the important point that the federal constitution of 1787 offered a model of regeneration that was very compatible with the perpetuation of slavery. This fact, however, did not escape Jean-Sifrein Maury, the eloquent far-right deputy who spoke in favor of upholding colonial autonomy. To this end, he examined the US constitution in a long and detailed speech that became the “catechism” of the white Dominguan planters.⁴³ He explained that if an abolitionist state such as Massachusetts could coexist with South Carolina within a

39. *AP*, 12:322–23.

40. Sieyès, *Observations*, 4.

41. Appleby, “America as a Model.”

42. Lacorne, *L’invention de la république*, 77–84; Belissa, “‘Agrandir le cercle de la civilisation.’”

43. *AP*, 26:55; Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), D XXV 86, Massiac to abbé Maury, Dec. 4, 1789; *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* 2: 727–30; Garran de Coulon, *Rapport*, 2:221.

single political entity, the same constitutional and institutional arrangement could apply to the kingdom of France at the imperial level. Colonists gathered at Club Massiac also toyed with the idea:

New England [the United States] is with its states perfectly in the same hypothesis as France with regard to its colonies. The Declaration of the Rights of Man [the US Bill of Rights] asserts like that of France, that all men are born free and remain equal in law, and yet slavery exists in almost all these parts, as it exists in the French colonies. . . . How could Congress have accorded this general principle with special exceptions? They did so by leaving to each state the right to regulate itself internally, to subject the states only to the general interest of the whole: by means of this political organization, slavery is tolerated in some states, proscribed in others, without the central legislature having violated the universal principle of freedom and equality.⁴⁴

Contrary to the rhetoric of Americanophile Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who viewed the United States as a model for abolitionism, the colonists clearly identified the path taken by the American Republic and understood it with more insight. A Dominguan planter diagnosed that the “prosperity of the United States depended on the current status of Blacks.”⁴⁵ By granting each state the freedom to legislate and define its internal regime, the United States could maintain slavery and all forms of discrimination by virtue of the rights of the federated states. This analysis did not bother distinguishing the Articles of Confederation from the federal constitution, as these differences, which almost ended the US experiment in 1787, were of little importance to French planters. From their perspective, the federal constitution just consolidated what was already present in the confederation.

However, the first decree submitted to the National Assembly by its newly created colonial committee and adopted on March 8, 1790, did not go in that direction. Instead, it asserted that the colonies “were part of the French Empire,” but they were “not included in the Constitution.”⁴⁶ The decree permitted colonists to form colonial assemblies and to pass “resolutions” (*voeux*) that required the sanction of the National Assembly and the king. The colonies were thus petitioners, a status that made it possible to preserve the indivisibility of national sovereignty despite the coexistence of several constitutions within the empire. The influence of Antoine Barnave, the most prominent deputy on the colonial

44. AN, D XXV 89, “Procès verbaux des séances de la commission établie à l’Hôtel Massiac,” Feb. 27, 1791.

45. Chabanon, *Précis historique*, 31.

46. AN, D XXV 3, “Proclamation du roi sur le Décret de l’Assemblée Nationale concernant les Colonies. Du 10 mars 1790.”

committee, proved instrumental in drafting this report.⁴⁷ He had one obsession: “No section of the empire is sovereign.”⁴⁸ In other words, the recognition of a legal distinction and the coexistence of several constitutions in the same regenerated empire did not call into question the principle of national unity.

The National Assembly also rejected the British model, which left much leeway to local governments. There were members of the assembly, though, who were more *anglomanes* than *américanistes*.⁴⁹ Representatives for Martinique, Louis Médéric Moreau de Saint Méry, the foremost expert on French colonial law, and Arthur Dillon, of Irish origin, continued to refer to the British system during preparatory debates. The imperial conversation among Britain, France, and Ireland that Mathieu Ferradou describes in his contribution to this forum also concerned the French Caribbean. That connection was partly due to the wealth and influence of white planters with Irish origins in the French Caribbean.⁵⁰ An alternate deputy for Saint-Domingue, who described himself as “colonist, creole, and French,” wrote a whole pamphlet about the historical analogy between Saint-Domingue and Ireland. He argued that in 1779 Britain had granted a quasi-independent status to Ireland, which was bound to England by a “fraternal” tie of protection worthy of emulation in the French Empire. Drawing the parallel with Saint-Domingue, he explained that France should not reject the “title of sister offered by a Colony whose riches made it powerful.”⁵¹ At stake was still the definition of a colony within a “regenerated empire.” The disagreement among colonists emerged again in 1791 when planters tried to draft a “model constitution” in Paris:

Gouy: But why use this word *colonies*? . . . We must call the colonies departments, provinces, because they are.

Malouet: No, sir, it would be a great evil.

Moreau de Saint Méry: Let’s stay what we are. Colonies . . .

Barnave: Either the colonies are integral parts of the empire or they are not.⁵²

In contrast with the British imperial organization, the “model constitution” copied the administrative and legal system of the metropole but adapted it to “local circumstances.”⁵³ Worried about a possible secession and doubting the loyalty

47. Didier, “Barnave et la politique coloniale.”

48. Archives Nationales d’Outre-mer (hereafter ANOM), 87 MIOM 95 fol. 250.

49. Potofsky, “Political Economy of the French-American Debt Debate.”

50. Hodgson, “Franco-Irish Saint-Domingue.”

51. Chabanon, *Précis historique*, 41.

52. ANOM, 87 MIOM 95 fol. 214.

53. AN, D XXV 3, 1791, *Instructions faites au nom des Comités de Constitution, des Colonies, de la Marine et du Commerce, de l’Assemblée nationale CONTENANT un projet de constitution pour les Colonies*.

of the white colonists, the deputies affirmed the principle of indivisibility and reasserted the monopoly of the National Assembly over laws concerning the navy and external trade.⁵⁴

The distinction established between metropolitan and colonial law did not survive the events in Saint-Domingue and the egalitarian demands made by free people of color. The additional instructions of March 28, 1790, about the electoral procedures neither explicitly admitted nor excluded *gens de couleur* who fulfilled the criteria necessary for active citizenship.⁵⁵ The white deputies' refusal to grant political rights to free people of color sparked Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes's unsuccessful revolt. The gruesome punishment of the leaders deeply shocked metropolitan public opinion, which had been mobilized by the militancy of Raimond, the Société des Citoyens de Couleur and the Amis des Noirs. The colonial deputies in Paris understood that they could not remain inactive and had to propose reforms favorable to the free people of color. The challenge was to do so while reinforcing white supremacy. To that end, the colonial committee proposed a "colonial conference" that would set the confederative project in motion. Representatives from all the American colonies would meet on the island of Saint-Martin to agree on the rights to be given to free people of color who would consequently be "grateful" for the "paternal affection" of whites. Colonial integration could then proceed on the basis of white supremacy. The goal of the conference was also to homogenize colonial legislation in the Americas and beyond.⁵⁶ Left-wing deputies such as Grégoire and Maximilien Robespierre rejected the proposal, but Louis Monneron, the deputy representing the "East Indies" mentioned by Elizabeth Cross in this forum, opposed it as well. Monneron argued that, although slave societies in the Mascarene were similar to those in the Antilles, he could not condone a proposal undermining the "regeneration of the empire."⁵⁷ Debates over the rights of *gens de couleur* exposed the disunity among white colonists' representatives across the empire.

In the end, a majority of deputies dismissed the idea of a colonial conference, but their rejection revealed the flagrant contradictions of their positions on citizenship, rights, and empire. On May 13, 1791, the National Assembly adopted the principle of "colonial initiative" on "non-free persons"—that is to say, slaves. In other words, the assembly passed a constitutional law limiting its power to legislate on slavery to instances when the Colonial Assemblies requested such laws. Yet the decree of May 15, 1791, granted the status of active

54. Geggus, "Racial Equality."

55. AN, D XXV 3, "Proclamation du Roi sur un Décret concernant l'île de Saint-Domingue. Du 9 avril 1790."

56. ANOM, 87 MIOM 95 fols. 168–69.

57. *Courrier politique et littéraire du Cap-Français* 39 (1791): 320.

citizens to the freeborn sons of a free father and mother. This meant that the National Assembly upheld its right to modify the legal status of persons in the colonies. By refusing to establish a federalist-type regime while also recognizing the legal specificity of the colonies, the National Assembly had built an extremely precarious institutional system.

Local Confederations in the Name of the Nation

The affirmation of the indivisibility of sovereignty in Paris did not eliminate the colonists' federal aspirations. Militant planters, far from being satisfied with the metropolitan decisions that enshrined the slave trade and slavery, took up arms. Historians have tended to underestimate the divergences between the white-led early revolution as it unfolded in the colonies and the reforms taken by the National Assembly under the influence of other colonists.⁵⁸ The rejection of "ministerial despotism," the denunciation of the *exclusif*, and the affirmation of local autonomy in support of white supremacy were the driving forces behind the insurrection.⁵⁹ This white revolt sought to participate in revolutionary regeneration by convening extralegal assemblies without the authorization of metropolitan authorities. The uprising, far from uniting the small planter population, displayed the many divisions among white colonists, splitting parishes into rival factions.⁶⁰ In some areas it also unleashed racial violence and terror on free people of color who were harassed, abused, molested, and lynched by angry white mobs. Some colonists did not hesitate to murder white allies of *gens de couleur*, such as admiralty judge Ferrand de Baudière.⁶¹ Ideas drawn from political economy and bureaucratic abstractions cannot alone explain the momentum for white federalism. The emotions associated with racial vengeance dominated many planters' political imagination.⁶²

The first self-proclaimed General (intentionally not "colonial") Assembly of Saint-Domingue took place in the city of Saint-Marc in the Western Province. This assembly, which gathered before the National Assembly's decrees had reached the colony, claimed to exercise the sovereignty of the local people. The "constitutional basis" (*bases constitutionnelles*) promulgated by the General Assembly of Saint-Marc in May 1790 stemmed from the affirmation that Saint-Domingue was a distinct political entity associated with metropolitan sovereignty, a slaveholding republic allied to a free-soil kingdom.⁶³ By opening Saint-Domingue's

58. Fradera, *Imperial Nation*, 78.

59. Benot, *La Révolution française*, 43–56.

60. AN, D XXV 86, from *Le Cap*, Dec. 30, 1790.

61. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 231–32.

62. Garran de Coulon, *Rapport*, 2:15–20.

63. Kahane, "La première assemblée."

market to international trade and dispatching emissaries to foreign powers, the assembly challenged the “tyranny” of the metropole and attempted to redefine the colonial bond as a “union between two federalized states.”⁶⁴ Inspired by Hilliard d’Auberteuil, Jean-Jacques Bacon de la Chevalerie, president of the General Assembly, justified this move by claiming the heritage of the original buccaneers—“independent and free conquerors.”⁶⁵ Saint-Domingue’s deputy Pierre-François Page, who later became a partisan of French colonization in West Africa, as Pernille Røge explains in her contribution to this issue, pushed for bold resistance in the name of both the French Revolution and the “virtues of our forefathers, these brave filibusters.”⁶⁶ *Flibustiers* would be the name of the small troop drafted by Port-au-Prince’s white population to fight free people of color a year later.⁶⁷ The insurrection quickly devolved into violence when Thomas Antoine Mauduit du Plessis put down a revolt by soldiers who supported the General Assembly in defiance of the governor’s authority on July 29, 1790. Mauduit, a hero of the American Revolutionary War, became the symbol of the Old Regime in Saint-Domingue and was later lynched by his own troops on March 4, 1791.⁶⁸ By then the most radical autonomists, called the Léopardins, had already exiled themselves to the mainland.⁶⁹

Although scholars of the revolution are aware of this episode, they have overlooked the efflorescence of ephemeral local confederations that ensued. The first was the Southern Federation, which mustered supporters of the short-lived General Assembly of Saint-Marc. Mobilized by the southern “patriotic clubs,” five or six hundred white colonists, *petits blancs*, and *grands blancs* gathered in the parishes of Petit-Goâve and Les Cayes and took up arms. They challenged the governor’s authority and attempted to intimidate the committees formed by powerful *gens de couleur*, such as Louis Boiron. Their first action was an assassination: the insurgents decapitated Major Codère, a military officer who favored the government, and paraded his head on a pike through the city of Les Cayes. Then, on August 14, 1790, in Léogane they signed a treaty with the governor. In line with the metropolitan patriotic agenda, they requested abolition of corporations, freedom of the press, and rearmament of all citizens (as the governor had tried to “disarm” the colonists), in an environment where most militiamen were people of color.⁷⁰

64. Garran de Coulon, *Débats*, 1:112.

65. Bacon de la Chevalerie, *Discours*.

66. Page, *Discours historique*, 97.

67. Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 120.

68. Thouzard, *Aux mânes du Colonel Mauduit*, 3; Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors*, 31–38.

69. Garran de Coulon, *Rapport*, 1:267–72.

70. Garran de Coulon, *Rapport*, 1:276–80.

The confederates (or federates—they used the words synonymously) created local institutions. A federative council, composed of emissaries representing the whites from thirteen parishes in the southern part of Saint-Domingue, claimed legislative, executive, and military powers. Confederate parishes acted to provide mutual assistance to municipalities. Each of the confederates was to take an oath to “maintain the constitution of the French Empire, in all that will be in accordance with our local proprieties . . . to be faithful to the nation, to the law, to the king, and to the French part of Saint-Domingue.”⁷¹ The ritual, including the Catholic Mass that followed it, was similar to oath-taking ceremonies that had become common in the metropole since the first Festival of Federation. However, the colonists transformed the meaning of their oath by asserting that Saint-Domingue had as strong a claim to their loyalty as France. The federative council and the oaths meant to contribute to revolutionary “regeneration” despite the distance, but the confederation was also a minimal and embryonic state that gave substance to the project of “domestic sovereignty” and pushed back against the encroachments of an overreaching centralized government.⁷² Confederation, according to these local initiatives, should happen at the local level before taking a transatlantic imperial form.

These local confederations drew inspiration from the “federative” movement that had characterized the beginnings of the French Revolution, at a time when “federation” was “seen as a convergence towards unity.”⁷³ The appeal of federation, both local and centripetal, had spread throughout the metropole—not from the center in Paris but from the provincial *fédérés*. Pierre Serna uses the enlightening oxymoron *unitary federalism* to describe this process.⁷⁴ This dynamic contributed to the gathering of the nation in its diversity around common principles. As Paolo Viola explains, the “construction of national unity allied and was mixed with the opportunity offered to regional affiliations to recover their role or to define their particular identity in the context of the construction of the new political society.”⁷⁵ Emerging in response to the Great Fear of 1789, the federations stemmed from a self-defense reflex in favor of the French Revolution. National guards and oaths of mutual assistance showed solidarity between the provinces and revolutionary Paris. The National Assembly reluctantly validated this movement of provincial confederations hoping to channel it from the center. The grandiose federation ceremony of July 14, 1790, celebrated the unity of regenerated France, the “pact of a general alliance with all the

71. Garran de Coulon, *Rapport*, 1:294–96.

72. Debbasch, “Au cœur du ‘gouvernement des esclaves.’”

73. Cousin, *Les fédéralismes*, 7.

74. Serna, “Every Revolution,” 180.

75. Viola, “Deux modèles de fédération,” 19.

provinces of the kingdom.”⁷⁶ All citizens took a concurrent oath of fidelity to the nation, the law, and the king. Although “overseas French” had not been able to take part in this great gathering, the Southern Federation had been galvanized by the metropolitan federative movement.⁷⁷

Another source of inspiration might have been more Caribbean. In March 1790 “patriots” from Guadeloupe and Martinique had “confederated” across the Caribbean Sea in support of the French Revolution against the military despotism of colonial governments.⁷⁸ The news of the budding civil war in Martinique was spreading in the region. While historians usually assume that Saint-Domingue was the engine of revolutionary turmoil in the Antilles, Martinique also played a leading role in the early years of the French Revolution. But Saint-Domingue’s federative movement was distinct from metropolitan, Guadeloupean, and Martinican *fédérés*, who subordinated their local allegiances to their Frenchness. In contrast, colonists on Saint-Domingue posited the equality of their Dominguan and French identities and claimed a role in the egalitarian regeneration. The federation challenged class inequalities among whites but consolidated racial hierarchies. Given the economic power of many Saint-Dominguan women of color, this bold assertion of white fraternity was not gender neutral, either.⁷⁹ Co-opting the federative rhetoric, the white southern colonists were in a way seceding, but they claimed to do so with loyalist intent: their secession from Old Regime Saint-Domingue, epitomized by the governor’s “despotism,” was also a declaration of union with revolutionary France.

New confederations formed even as the political context in Saint-Domingue changed, and the inaugural confederal experience recurred in new circumstances. A year later, a second—white-only—Colonial Assembly withdrew political rights from free people of color in spite of the law of May 15, 1791, which granted the status of active citizen to the freemen born to two free parents. After the outbreak of the slave insurrection in the north, some colonial deputies contemplated carrying out a real secession from France and unsuccessfully offered the “Creole nation” of Saint-Domingue to Great Britain.⁸⁰ A new confederation—the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation—inspired by the Southern Federation but pursuing opposite goals and challenging the Colonial Assembly, emerged in the west in August 1791. The confederation was established by a treaty of alliance between free people of color, under the leadership of

76. *Confédération nationale*, 1.

77. *Confédération nationale*, 6.

78. Pérotin Dumon, *Etre patriote sous les tropiques*, 137–42; Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 96; Cormack, *Patriots*, 78–80.

79. Rogers and King, “Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières.”

80. Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 46–78.

Pinchinat, Bauvais, and Rigaud, and white royalists, led by Charles Hanus de Jumecourt. They “confederated” at the local level while claiming loyalty to the French Revolution and the metropole. This new confederation opposed a number of white supremacist institutions: the Colonial Assembly, the Provincial Assembly of the West, the municipality of Port-au-Prince, and the Jacobin Club. Although the confederation was a revolutionary and extraconstitutional institution, it remained committed to the rule of law. Members demanded the strict application of the national laws, in particular the decrees of March 28, 1790, and May 15, 1791. Article 1 of the *concordat* stipulated that the confederates would “contribute” to “the *literal execution* of all the points and articles of the decrees and instructions of the National Assembly sanctioned by the King, without restriction and without any interpretation.”⁸¹ Far from being secessionist, the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation wanted to guarantee national unity and equality before the law, while indicting the “independentists” of Port-au-Prince. Confederates self-identified as “armed petitioners” who rightfully resisted oppression (Article 2 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen) and preserved the integrity of property in the colony (Article 17)—that is, slavery.⁸² The formation of a national guard, comprising free people of color and whites, and the use of slave armies followed, which created a situation of civil war.⁸³

From then on, the political landscape descended into chaos. A majority of whites were concerned that the slave insurrection in the north would spread to the west and resolved to make peace with the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation. A treaty signed on October 23, 1791, invited free people of color to enter the city of Port-au-Prince, but the self-proclaimed Jacobins resumed hostilities and began to massacre *gens de couleur*.⁸⁴ They burned the city down, although they accused free women of color of starting the fire.⁸⁵ To focus on the threat posed by the slave insurrection, the Colonial Assembly eventually agreed to admit people of color. Yet everything changed again when the colonists learned about the law of September 28, 1791, which rescinded the decree of May 15. In France, the National Assembly, worried about white secession and ignorant of the slave insurrection, had backtracked and confirmed the exclusion of free people of color from “active citizenship.” Metropolitan policy reversals further destabilized an already wobbly colonial terrain shaken by constant local tremors.

81. *Concordat* of Sept. 11, 1791, quoted in *AP*, 35:132.

82. AN, D XXV 1, Commissioners of the Croix-des-Bouquets to the Civil Commissioners, Dec. 6, 1791.

83. Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 99–118.

84. Commissaires, *Mémoire historique*, 28–61.

85. Garran de Coulon, *Débats*, 3:133.

The political significance of the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation was profoundly unstable, not least because it drew its legitimacy from the French Revolution, which was still in motion. The National Assembly entrusted a civil commission with extraordinary powers to implement the law and restore peace. Far from restoring order, however, the arrival of commissioners Ignace-Frédéric de Mirbeck, Philippe-Rose Roume, and Edmond Saint-Léger aggravated the turmoil. They proclaimed a general amnesty on December 5, 1791. Then they tried to convince free people of color to acknowledge their own political exclusion and demanded the dismantling of the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation.⁸⁶ Previously, the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation had been the legalist institution, but ironically, with the enactment of the new law of September 28, 1791, the confederates were now regarded as rebels and counterrevolutionaries. Distance produced multiple distortions that led to political and ideological mayhem.

Instead of being a force for stability, the involvement of Parisian authorities further fractured the colony. The commissioners condemned the *concordats* for being extraconstitutional. “Our only compass is the law,” they repeated, but this compass had steered them off course. Their presence did nothing to clarify the status of colonial law. An exchange between Commissioner Mirbeck and a member of the Colonial Assembly highlights the extent of this misunderstanding. Facing challenges to his authority, Mirbeck asserted that the powers of the commissioners were, strictly speaking, dictatorial. He claimed that their prerogatives derived from a decree of the National Assembly concerning the Alsatian departments of Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin.⁸⁷ Mirbeck did not refer to Alsace by chance: according to him, this province, located at the margins of the kingdom, had a special status that made it comparable to Saint-Domingue. Colonial Deputy Laurent-Marie de Léaumont disagreed, however. Saint-Domingue’s colonial sovereignty, he argued, was based on the absolute power of the masters over their slaves. “The colonial assembly cannot be compared to an administrative assembly of a department,” he wrote, because the colonial assembly “is in part legislative, exerting the valuable duty of taking INITIATIVE on those matters that fall beyond the internal regime of the colony [e.g., commercial laws, Navy, diplomacy]. [The Colonial Assembly] is obliged to ensure that no one—neither the French senate nor its delegates—alters the local custom that secures constituents’ properties.”⁸⁸ These uncertainties accelerated the fragmentation of Saint-Domingue. In Mirbeck’s view, national sovereignty subordinated Saint-Domingue to the general will; in Léaumont’s, the white slaveholders’ local sovereignty entailed the existence of a federal empire.

86. Mirbeck, *Compte sommaire*, 5–14.

87. Mirbeck, *Compte sommaire*, 27–29.

88. AN, DXXV 1, “A Monsieur de Mirbeck, commissaire national civil,” 3–4.

This alternative, though, was only one of the many political possibilities deployed in revolutionary Saint-Domingue. The Northern leaders of the slave uprising, Jean-François Papillion and Georges Biassou, strategically employed the constitutional vocabulary coming from the metropole to negotiate an arrangement with the commissioners in the winter of 1791–92. Hoping for reforms and amnesty, they explained that Saint-Domingue was an “integral part of the empire.”⁸⁹ White colonists rejected their demands, which were also at odds with the wishes of their own troops, who did not want to return to plantations. In the west and in the south, politics took divergent forms on plantations that had become insurgent camps. Saint-Domingue’s thirty thousand free people of color did not constitute a unified group; they were divided across class, political, religious, regional, and even racial lines. Some were open to collaboration with the enslaved, but others were not. The fragile alliance between Romaine Rivière, called Romaine la Prophétesse, and Pinchinat highlighted these contrasts.⁹⁰ Rivière was a free person of color who ruled a coalition of male and female enslaved people and *gens de couleur* over a vast territory running from Léogane to Jacmel. Rivière and her followers had an agenda rooted in Saint-Domingue. Their royalism and their Catholicism echoed revolutionary debates but hardly exerted any influence on Parisian politics. In contrast, leaders of the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation traveled back and forth across the Atlantic, had social circles and economic stakes in the metropole, and saw their future within this imperial framework. Pinchinat, who was light-skinned, highly educated, well connected, and proslavery, was better able to present the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation as the vehicle of the *gens de couleurs*’ revolution.

Republicanism against Federalism

In metropolitan France, the king’s failed attempt to escape Paris made federalism even more unrealizable. Radicals in the National Assembly deemed any support for a federal system counterrevolutionary or viewed it as a ploy for demagogic anarchy and the division of the kingdom.⁹¹ In the aftermath of the republican movement of June 1791, Barnave reasserted his rejection of the US model. The American federal constitution, he asserted, suited a new people “occupying a large territory with a sparse population, and with no powerful neighbors.” In France, however, it was necessary to “maintain the national

89. AN, DXXXV 1, Jean-François, Biassou and the Citizens of Color to the Commissioners, Dec. 9, 1791.

90. Rey, *Priest and the Prophetess*.

91. A democratic federalism emerged in Paris in the spring of 1791. See Monnier, “Mouvement républicain et fédéralisme radical.”

union” and “to place in the center an immutable power”—a king who could resist “the caprices of an immense population agitated by all the passions of an old society.” As Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne stated: “So that we can never find in the Constitution an argument for a subdivision into federative republics, I ask that this principle be consecrated and that it be said: ‘The kingdom is one and indivisible.’”⁹² As a result, “the French colonies and possessions in Asia, Africa and America, although part of the French Empire, are not included in this Constitution” (Title VII, Article 8).⁹³ The monarchy not only guaranteed the unity and indivisibility of the kingdom but also made the colonial exception possible without resorting to federalism.

At this point, the abolitionists in the new Legislative Assembly, Brissot and his Girondin partners, started to attack the suspicious connections between royalism and colonialism, turning their back on their earlier support for a federalist project. Free people of color in western Saint-Domingue, pushing their metropolitan allies to adjust their political agenda, reshaped the terms of the debate in Paris. In 1789 Brissot had written that, if European powers “want to keep their colonies, they must treat them more as confederated governments, as allies, than as subjects.”⁹⁴ Two years later the Brissotins endorsed the policy of the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation and advocated the legal assimilation of the colonies, relentlessly demanding that the National Assembly ratify the treaties of confederation (*concordats*) and repeal the law of September 28, 1791. Some free people of color had taken the lead, associating republicanism with antifederalism.

Colonial politics intersected with metropolitan concerns. Debates over the power of the king implicated discussions of the status of colonies within the empire. The constitution of 1791 that had defined the colony as a “property” of the kingdom was now counterrevolutionary, a remnant of the Old Regime, according to the Jacobins. If France tolerated such exceptions, Brissot explained, “despotism would soon return from the colonies to its bosom.”⁹⁵ According to deputy Armand-Guy de Kersaint, the constitution seemed to make the colonies a possession of the king. The “absolute independence of the colonies” would be preferable, Kersaint asserted, “to their independence from the legislative power, their dependence on the executive power.” Posing a threat to the French Revolution, the king, as “master of the colonies,” would “have in his hands the source of public wealth.”⁹⁶ For Jean-Philippe Garran de Coulon, the consolidation of

92. *AP*, 29:301.

93. French Constitution of Sept. 3, 1791.

94. Brissot, *Réflexions*, 15.

95. Brissot, *Réplique*, 22.

96. Kersaint, *Moyens proposés*, 10.

the principle of indivisibility and territorial unity involved assimilating colonial space: “The colonies are explicitly part of the empire and, consequently, of the nation.”⁹⁷ Armand Gensonné, another Girondin representative, clarified: “The colonies are not republics confederated to the metropole.”⁹⁸ The law of April 4, 1792, which granted equal rights to free people of color, marked the first success of this assimilative policy, although it left out the major problem of slavery itself.

The April law passed only because slave insurrection posed a sufficiently grave threat to French economic interests to induce most of the planter class across color lines to support it. Moreover, the National Assembly endorsed a revolutionary policy that was drafted in Saint-Domingue. Before he officially received the law of April 4, Roume, the last remaining civil commissioner, recognized the legitimacy of the Council of Peace and Union created in Saint-Marc in May 1792—an offshoot of the Croix-des-Bouquets Confederation.⁹⁹ Appalled at the white colonists’ attitude toward free people of color, he decided to validate this local arrangement. In Saint-Domingue notions of unity and indivisibility originated with a local confederation—they were not imposed from the metropolitan center.

On September 25, 1792, the French Republic was declared “one and indivisible.” The word *republic* remained vague, as the revolutionaries proclaimed it reluctantly and with some level of anxiety. Only one aspect was consensual: the republic would not be federal. The meaning of the rejection of federalism differed along party lines. For the Montagnards, the principle of indivisibility reaffirmed centrality of the legislature and prevented secession at the nation’s periphery. The Girondins intended to contain the power of the Commune of Paris and to ensure that sovereignty belonged to the nation in its entirety, not just Paris. As far as the French West Indies were concerned, deputies on both sides of the hemicycle viewed federalism as a veil for disloyalty and monarchism. In that sense, the redefinition of the link between the colony and the metropole was fully entwined with the messy transformation of the whole French political community.

Conclusion

Although indivisibility and unity were principles that emerged very early on in the French Revolution, federation and federalism are relevant entry points to better understand the coconstruction of the nation-state and empire, not only

97. *AP*, 40:217.

98. *AP*, 40:374.

99. Popkin, “French Revolution’s Royal Governor,” 220–22.

from an ideological point of view but also in concrete political terms. Revolutionaries proposed ambiguous “federal,” “confederal,” or “federative” projects on several occasions and at different scales. Although short-lived, these experiments remain historically significant. Taking into account scenarios that did not consolidate into long-term realities challenges a linear narrative of the nation-state. The French and Saint-Domingue Revolutions also had a shared “confederal phase,” to use Clément Thibaud’s expression: a “third moment” during which the European empires practiced readjustments, hesitating between the subordination of the colonies to a metropolitan center and breakup by independence movements.¹⁰⁰ Federalism’s goal was “re-accommodating colonies into imperial formations.”¹⁰¹ In Saint-Domingue federation and federalism challenged the political and civic boundaries of France as much as the debates held at the National Assembly, in the streets of metropolitan cities, or in the fields of the Vendée. What these uprisings had in common was exposing the defining features of French unity as structurally unsound within an empire in a revolutionary crisis. Occurring at a time of intertwined crises and unleashing a maelstrom of emotions, these debates were no longer just academic conversations.

Federalism was the preferred route for a majority of white colonists because they wanted simultaneously to maintain white supremacy, racial slavery, and Saint-Domingue’s association with France. Some—not all—free people of color emerged as the most fervent spokesmen of national unity: men like Raimond and Pinchinat incited the Girondins to attack what they came to recognize as an intimate connection between monarchism and federalism. Toussaint Louverture synthesized these different approaches: by proclaiming the constitution of 1801, he established a confederation between Saint-Domingue and France, creating a relationship of cosovereignty that momentarily clarified the definition of the empire. The expedition sent by Napoléon Bonaparte and the independence of Haiti ended this experiment.

Yet this narrative, however rich in twists and turns, remains somehow too simple. There was neither one great French revolution nor even two connected revolutions (French and Dominguan) but a number of entangled but distinct revolts that led to political and legal illegibility. The collapse of the metropolitan government created chaos, opening up a world of possibilities in the colonies and producing battlefields in which competing interests collided. Numerous players improvised and clashed without having a clear or stable agenda; they constantly reimagined what was possible and what consequences might follow, and they reassessed what was within or out of reach. This complexity is the

100. Morelli, Thibaud, and Verdo, *Les empires atlantiques*.

101. Adelman, “Age of Imperial Revolutions,” 332.

reason these global stories can be approached only from the ground level. Historical actors selectively appropriated ideas and symbols to meet their local needs while taking the imperial and Atlantic context into account. Deeply rooted in the Caribbean trading networks across Atlantic empires, white planters utilized the British and US models to renegotiate their own colonial relationships. Regional confederations in Saint-Domingue—of which I have analyzed only a few examples—blurred obligations of loyalty and ideological choices.¹⁰² Revolutionaries who had previously been enslaved experimented with a variety of political forms at the local level, many inspired by their West African experience. Although they did not necessarily engage with the “federalist” imperial debate, they nonetheless confederated plantations into larger political units.¹⁰³ There was no single script to follow: ideas arrived through a variety of channels, including the metropole, the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa; were reinvented locally; and to some extent were reexported to other parts of the Atlantic world. Not all developments in Saint-Domingue’s diverse revolutionary landscape were equally influential in the metropole, but some of these struggles were inspired by and spilled over into other regions of the world. While the conversation was constant, words were often misinterpreted, came too early or too late, prompted unexpected consequences, or fell on deaf ears. A decentered imperial perspective reminds us how shifting, elusive, misinformed, and intertwined revolutions were in the eighteenth century, and still are today.

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102. Local coalitions of parishes emerged and dissolved in the 1790s. For instance, the Grande Anse Confederation, which welcomed the British in 1793, was quite similar to the Southern Federation of 1790.

103. The local polities created by the formerly enslaved would warrant a separate analysis. See Thornton, “I Am the Subject of the King of Congo”; and Casimir, *Haitians*.

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